



Chapter 2 A Royal Road to Power

In 1922, because of a weak and inept Liberal and Democratic government, of which Luigi Facta was Prime Minister, Mussolini revealed his hand: "Our program is simple; we wish to govern Italy. It is not our programs that are wanting for the salvation of Italy, but men and willpower."

Within a few days the March on Rome began. By this time the King and the Church recognized that Mussolini's republicanism and anticlericalism had vanished. When Facta appealed to the King to declare martial law and to make an end to Mussolini and his "Black Shirts", the King refused. Instead, he called Mussolini to Rome to form a new government.

A few hours later Mussolini received the following telegram, "His Majesty the King asks you to come immediately to Rome for he wishes to offer you the responsibility of forming a Ministry. With respect, "General Cittadini."

At the prime age of thirty-nine, the youngest in a line of twenty-four Prime Ministers who filled this office, during the sixty years following the unification of Italy in 1862, Mussolini became the Prime Minister of Italy.

As the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mussolini had prepared himself by a careful personal study of the characteristics and attitudes of the five major world powers, which had involved themselves and their citizens in the causation, affairs, and final peace agreement of the Great War that had ended four years previously. A war that had not seen its equal in numbers of nations involved, numbers of civilians and soldiers killed and wounded. He still saw Italian veterans on the streets of Italy, walking on crutches, missing limbs and suffering from post battle shock. He was sure these same casualties would also be found in England, France, Germany, Austria, Russia and to a much lesser degree in America.

He knew the transference of Italy from a torpid agricultural-based society, plagued by regionalism, mafia led societies in the south and a nation without sufficient resources of raw materials and financing would not be an easy or short-term task. He decided that Italians needed a better and more efficient railway system to tie these various regions, dialects and semi-autonomous cultures together to form a united and formidable nation. He began the task of creating a railway system that would be one of the finest and most modern in the world. It was an urgent unification matter that required the government's undivided attention.

His first international affair was ignited in 1923, by the assassination of an Italian General, Enrico Tellini and several members of the Italian frontier commission that were marking the border between Greece and Albania. They were ambushed and murdered in Greek territory. The murders shook the then fragile world powers. Mussolini acted quickly, after demanding financial compensation and the arrest and trial of the killers. The Greek government's claim was that they could not find the killers and had no money to pay. Mussolini ordered his military to capture the Greek island of Corfu, which they did. The Conference of Ambassadors decreed that Greece must pay, which they did before Italy relinquished Corfu. The Greek Government had been conducting an anti-Italian campaign for sometime, and these affairs were to remain sensitive issues between the two countries.

Mussolini, in his first year of leadership, almost did away with the financial debt of the country which had existed for many years. The railroads, then a national disgrace, had been bankrupt. He reversed the relationship with the Vatican to a positive approach, strengthened the family by elimination of inheritance taxes and demonstrated to the nation that Italy was to have its own foreign policy, and not ride on the coat tails of England.

The London Daily Mail of September 25, 1925 carried an article about Mussolini "Mussolini, the man and the miracle" and an editorial in the same edition:

In a sense the Italian Prime Minister has indeed done miraculous things for he has poured fresh life into the veins of a great people, and given it a new inspiration, a new belief in itself, a new ideal of discipline, and self sacrifice, and a new path to happiness and content. That is a wonderful event and it puts Signore Mussolini high among the regenerators and nation builders of all time. Only those will belittle his work who forget or did not know how close to the brink of catastrophe Italy stood three years after the Peace.



Terrorism and mob rule were getting one district after another into their grip. Patriotism was denounced, religion insulted, law and order defied. Bands of red conspirators were setting up Soviets in the cities and seizing factories in the name of the proletariat

From this evil fate Mussolini rescued his countrymen. Today Italy is perhaps the most stable, socially, economically, politically of the nations of Europe.

Discipline, self-devotion, and industry sum up the doctrine which Mussolini has imposed upon his countrymen and though some rejected the gospel at first, it has in the end filled them with enthusiasm.

In the 1920s and 1930s, before England and France declared war on Germany, on September 3, 1939, men from every nation in the world, such men as Churchill, Ghandi, and President Woodrow Wilson, Sir Austen Chamberlain, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Edison, came to pay their respects. Winston Churchill, after meeting him said, "he is one of the great statesmen of all time," and further said that if he were an Italian he would be a Fascist. Edison said Mussolini was the greatest genius of modern times. Mahatma Ghandi called him a superman. Chamberlain developed a close relationship with Mussolini, and by this relationship kept Italy in the British camp for years, even though Mussolini's closest advisors advised him against placing his trust in the nation's future with the British government.

Between 1922 and 1929 he had sixty thousand audiences and dealt with two million requests from ordinary citizens of Italy and the world. At Christmas he received thirty thousand greeting cards from all over the world, and almost to a person, anyone who wrote to him received a personal reply. He was the world's most popular political figure for nearly twenty years.

Mussolini reawakened the inventive and ingenuity of the Italian people and the nation. He undertook public works programs with social enterprises which complemented the need and the desire of the nation to reestablish itself once again, as a productive, progressive successful nation.

The most important program and most publicized was the draining of the Pontine Marshes. The program called for the transformation of 150,000 acres of marshland between Rome and Terracina, into small agricultural landholdings on which 75,000 people from all parts of the country were established.

When the economic depression of 1929 - 1931 hit Italy as hard as any other country, there was a shortage of lira, and an attempt to devalue it. Mussolini immediately defended the currency by reducing wages and asking for more sacrifices from all Italians, rich or poor. It became necessary to reduce imports and his government began a program, known as the Battle of the Grain, by which grain production competitions were rewarded to successful farmers, provinces. He himself worked for a labourer's pay on local threshing machines. By the end of 1933, the Battle was won when imported grains were reduced by 80%, which helped to win the War of the Lira.